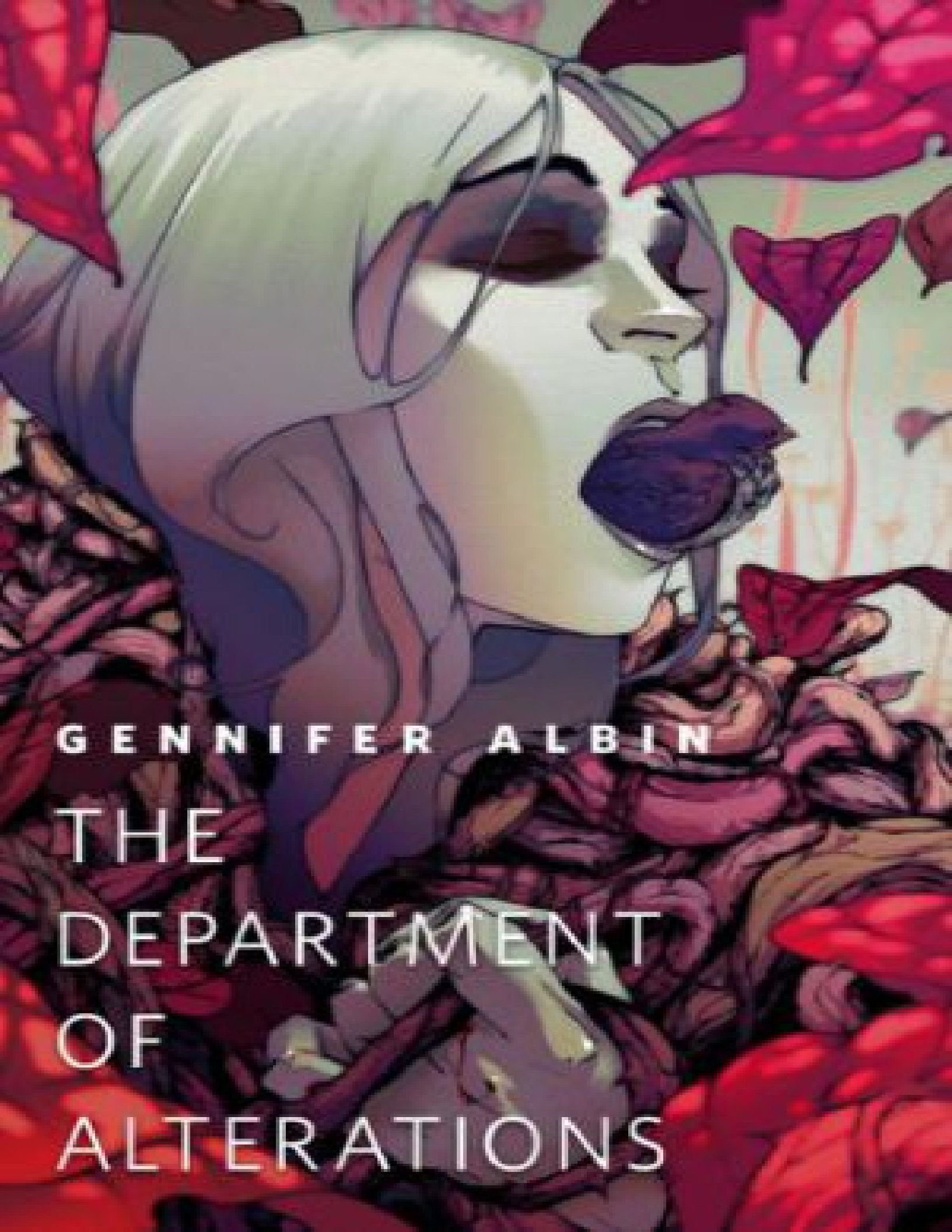
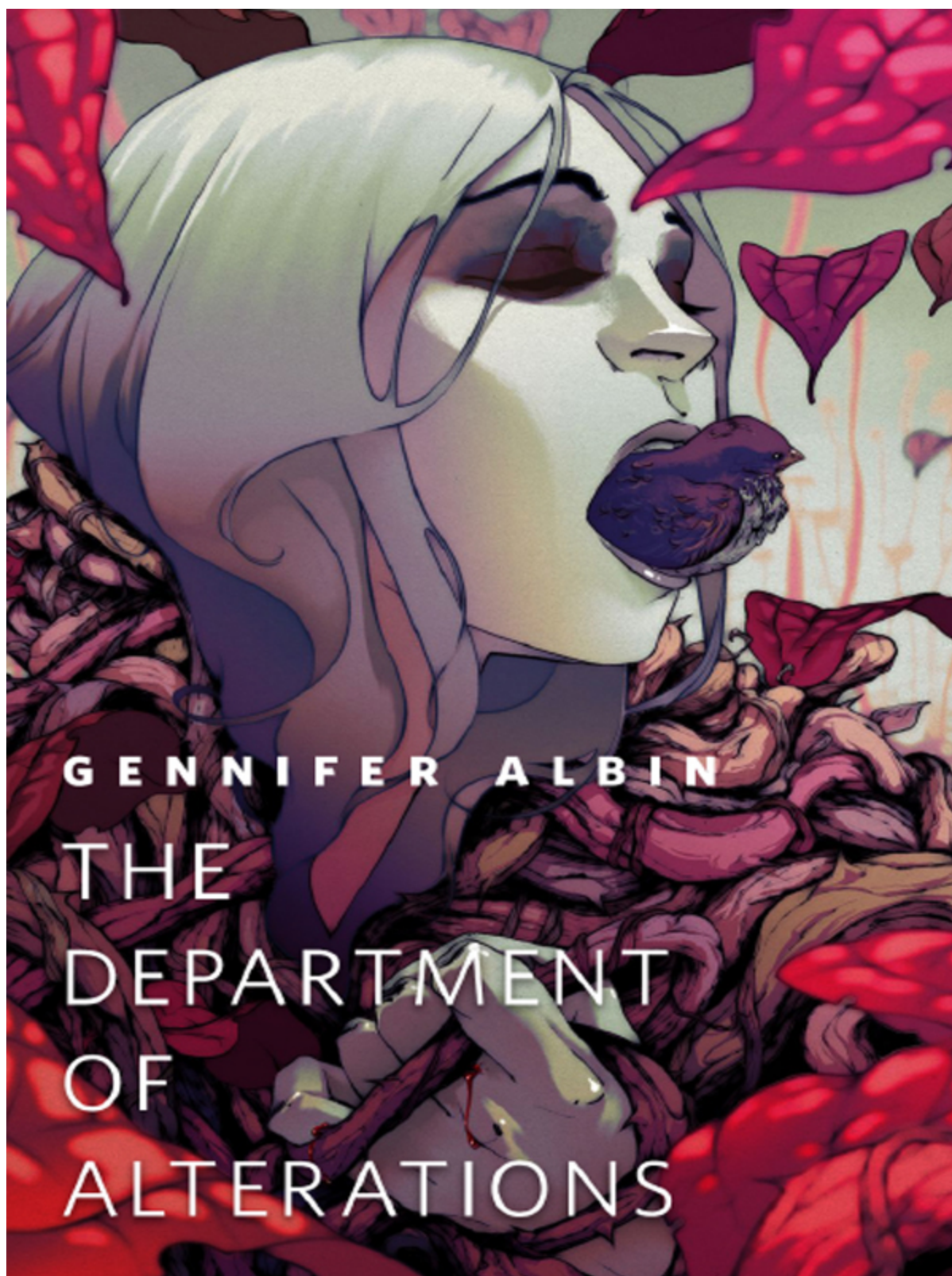




GENNIFER ALBIN

THE
DEPARTMENT
OF
ALTERATIONS



TOR·COM 

G E N N I F E R A L B I N

The Department of Alterations

illustration by

G O Ñ I M O N T E S

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The tailor trailed his fingers across Karoline Swander's stomach in a way that felt too personal, but she didn't object. Instead she sucked in a breath and held it, waiting for him to be done. She stared at the cement ceiling and wondered how he could operate in an area so close to Romen's busy metro center.

"You must be desperate," he said, not bothering to spare her feelings.

"I'd prefer if we didn't talk," she said in a quiet voice.

"Whatever works for you, sister," he said. He came into view, peering down over her, smiling a bit too much. "As long as you have the credits, that is."

"I didn't bring credits," she said.

The tailor stepped back and raised his hands.

"Deal's off."

"No, wait," she said, struggling to sit up and lower her blouse at the same time. "I brought this."

She held out a pearl necklace.

"How sweet. A gift?" he asked, taking it and examining each gem carefully.

"Does it matter?"

"It does if you stole it," he said.

"No one steals in Romen," Karoline said automatically.

This made him laugh. It was a wheezy, low chuckle that was more mocking than amused. "No, not in our fair metro."

Karoline didn't respond to this, she just watched him. She was here after all, breaking the law. It was no longer impossible to believe others might do the same.

"Is it enough?" she asked.

"It'll be fine," he said, pocketing the strand. "But for that, I can't guarantee it will work."

"But they're real," she protested.

"And hard to move. Don't worry. This isn't easy, but I can do it."

Karoline hesitated. She could still leave. Her husband would never notice the pearls were gone. "Have you done this before?"

"This? No. But I've done worse."

Somehow she didn't find this reassuring.

"So, you don't want your husband to know that his—"

"No." She interrupted him. "Of course not. Will he realize?"

"Relax," the tailor said. "I just assumed. When someone shows up with valuables and not credits, it's because they don't want someone to know. And when women show up, asking for alterations, you can bet their husband is that *someone*."

"You said you didn't do this often," Karoline pointed out.

"Not this. But most women don't want what you want. Similar problem, similar fixes, but very different results. In fact, you're lucky, I just had one earlier. Only reason I can do this now."

Karoline's stomach turned over. She supposed the material had to come from somewhere, but she didn't need him to elucidate further.

"Your husband isn't going to ask questions, is he?" the tailor asked.

She thought of yesterday's supper and the pinched face her husband had made when she told him about her trip to the clinic. He'd never bothered to come to a clinic appointment. He hadn't been tested. The doctor had made it clear the problem was Karoline's alone. The memory of her last visit at the clinic swam to mind unbidden.

"*Doctor.*" She hesitated on the title. "*Could the problem be with my husband?*"

The older gentleman gave her a sharp look. "*I doubt that, Mrs. Swander.*"

"I don't think he cares how it happens," she told the tailor. *None of them do.*

"That's what they all think." He handed her a small mask. "Put this on."

Karoline didn't ask questions. She wouldn't be marked variant. As a minister's wife, she should have the connections to get on a reweave list, but her husband was adamant that adoption was not an option. Nor was he willing to use his influence to get her advanced treatment. He was simultaneously barricading her and pushing her forward, and the psychological discord of it all sent her nerves into a violent tantrum. As the oxygen seeped into her mouth and nostrils, she felt herself calm.

"There you go," he said. "I'm using a touch of stimulant in that to keep the valpron from knocking you out flat."

Normally she would have objected to this, but she felt so nice. The calm spread through her limbs, curled into her fingers and toes, and left her placid and yielding on the table.

"Let's see if we can make your husband happy," he said, lifting her shirt up and running his hands over her bare flesh. Karoline didn't mind at all now, but the tailor's insistence on bringing up her husband turned her mind to the previous evening.

She had decided to bring the topic up to Max at the dinner table before he retired to watch the stream. But conversation was a struggle, choked by indifference. She didn't care much about the inner workings of the local minister's office. Or their boring politics. Except when they involved policies regarding medical release or procreation standards. But he'd stopped bringing those topics up. He did not appreciate her impassioned views on the matter. Almost as much as he didn't appreciate her faulty womb.

However, the longer she waited to persuade him, the less time he might have to exert his influence on the advisory committee.

"I saw Dr. Powell today," she said. She laid her fork down. She hadn't eaten a bite anyway. Max had either not noticed or decided not to comment.

"Yes?" he asked. Interest colored his face. He was listening to her.

Karoline held her breath, knowing how quickly his expression would change. She savored his alert eyes for a moment. "He is passing my files to

the advisory committee to get approval for further patching.”

Max’s eyes faded back down to his plate and he continued eating. Once he might have offered a halfhearted condolence.

“He thinks we should consider getting on a reweave list,” she continued.

This time when he looked at her, his eyes blazed. “That is not an option. You may tell him that.”

“I don’t think it would make a difference. If we aren’t approved for further patching—”

“We’ll keep trying.”

“Without the patching...” She stumbled over the words. She didn’t want to finish the statement—didn’t want to tell him there was no hope. “Could you speak with someone at the office?”

“And admit to them that you can’t have a baby?” he asked. “I’m embarrassed enough.”

It wasn’t the first time he had voiced his shame over their familial status, but it still sucked the air from her lungs, leaving only the ache of future tears in her chest.

But she’d caught his attention now, and this time he continued, his rage spilling out. “I’ve already kept you away from enough events that people expect me to announce your pregnancy. If you would at least dress like the wife of an official, I wouldn’t have to worry about their assumptions. You should hear what they whisper about you, about *me*, with what they have seen of you.”

“What do they whisper?” she dared to ask, but then immediately regretted it as Max’s fists curled into balls.

“You know what they whisper about men who don’t have children. Even having a wife doesn’t put those rumors to bed, especially a wife who looks like you.”

He left her then, disappearing into his den. Karoline didn’t let the tears escape as she washed the dishes. She’d long ago perfected the art of keeping them imprisoned there. The only thing worse than not being able to cry would be allowing him to see her do it. When she had finished the work, she slipped into the master bedroom and sat on the edge of her bed. Her eyes wandered to his bed, adjacent to her own. She hadn’t had to make it in weeks. The sheets were crisp, tucked neatly under the mattress, and the comforter smooth. He slept in his study except when he came to her.

She tried not to think about that as she undressed. Her skirt fell quickly from her waist as she unbuttoned it. She hung it and her wool blazer on a hanger and then placed the suit in the closet next to a dozen nearly identical dress suits. It faded into the others, as muted and bulky as the rest. Karoline slipped her hand past the suits and drew a dress out, pushing the suits away to stare at it. It was canary yellow; she recalled the last time she had worn it. How long it had been since she had worn anything so bright! Anything that sung with life. Then she pushed it back into the depths of her wardrobe and shut the door.

“This is going to sting a little and then it will itch, like you’re being tickled.” The tailor’s voice drew her back to the makeshift clinic. She appreciated him keeping her informed, but she closed her eyes so she wouldn’t have to see what he was doing.

“How did you find me anyway?” he asked. “Nice ladies like you don’t usually know how to navigate the grey market.”

She tried to speak, but the oxi-mask muffled her voice. He pushed it up. “That should be enough anyway.”

“A woman from my neighborhood. She has connections.” She let the word linger without going into details.

“What’s her name?” he asked.

Karoline didn’t like the way he was pressing her for more information. “I thought I could expect some anonymity.”

“Sure, but I need to know my friends,” he said.

“Her daughter is in my class. She had an older sister who always seemed a bit...off.” Karoline thought this was a nice way to put it. The girl’s sister had been strange, standoffish, but bright. Karoline had guessed she was keeping a secret. Not only because of the girl’s oddities, but because her mother’s face contorted with fear when Karoline mentioned testing during a parent conference.

“And this mother trusted you enough to just point you in the direction of the grey market?” He didn’t believe her, but Karoline didn’t care.

“Women are understanding about these things,” she said.

“I suppose.” He ignored her after that, turning his attention back to his work. Her belly prickled. The itch tickled, but she didn’t want to laugh.

Tendrils of pain seared into her skin and lingered, bursting into raw flames when they crept too close together, until her torso was on fire. It was more intense than he had led her to believe. She wondered then how Meria had known where to send her. If she'd done this once, too. If she'd been one of the women who sought out the tailor for more sinister purposes.

But Meria had two children. Two fair-faced girls. She had no need of a tailor, and yet, Karoline had been correct in her suspicion. She wouldn't have had the courage to seek her out if it hadn't been for the telebound. She would have chanced anything, with anyone, after that.

She barely heard the girl's farewell as she was lost in her own thoughts. The telebound had come to her at lunchtime. She didn't need to open the sealed memo the secretary had delivered to her to know what it said.

"Mrs. Swander," the girl called again. She blinked and met the girl's gaze.

"Yes, Amie?"

"Have a nice weekend," the girl said brightly. Karoline nodded and attempted a smile. She failed, but Amie bounced out of the room with her classmates without noticing. Karoline watched as the girl's fair curls disappeared from sight. Once she had been like that—bubbly and eager to earn the approval of her instructor. Karoline didn't delude herself into thinking the girl liked her. As with so many others her age, Amie probably believed instructor approval would gain her an advantage at the testing. But Karoline knew it didn't. She couldn't tell the girls that though.

She couldn't tell them that they weren't special and that none of them would escape the monotony of Romen, the well-oiled capitol of Arras's Western Sector. It wouldn't matter anyway. Every girl thought she was special until she was dismissed. Karoline felt a fleeting moment of satisfaction at the thought. It wouldn't be long before the girls understood the nature of monotony. The crippling oppression of sameness.

She stared at the telebound and then she crumbled it up and threw it in the recycle bin.

No one bothered to say hello as she exited the academy. She had few friends among the other instructors. Several of them were much older and it

was not easy to gain entrance into their exclusive gossip circle. The younger teachers spoke awkwardly when she visited the lounge, tiptoeing around stories of their infants and toddlers. She had stopped taking lunch there two years ago. Now she ate at her desk while the girls were in the cafeteria.

Outside the academy, elms, still green with summer leaves, yawned over her head, blowing slightly in the September breeze. Autumn would arrive soon and the world would turn yellow and then brown until it all withered and fell away. She hated that season. It made no sense to bother with it when the Guild could simply advise the Spinsters to keep Arras green and alive. But then, she reasoned under her breath, maybe that wasn't possible. She was proof that even the most invasive loom technology could not ensure perfect order.

"Have they tried other options?" the tailor asked. "I see evidence of scarring."

"Yes," Karoline said. Needles flashed through her mind. Cuffs that bound her to a cold, metal bed. But as aggressive as the fingers were that explored her, as many hours as she spent under the blinding light of the clinic's lamp, she'd not seen any results. The doctor's words flashed through her mind:

"You're young, but not as young as we would like to do more extensive patching. At this point, I need to get approval for further treatment."

He hadn't bothered to look up from his digifile.

"Well, they don't do things like this there. Not yet," the tailor murmured.

She felt something then. Agony clawed out of her and she gasped in pain, but he only reached up to pull the oxi-mask back over her face. His fingers left crimson on the plastic mask. She could see it just over her nose.

It occurred to her then that it was too late. She couldn't turn back from this now. She'd asked a man to alter her, and now her blood was on his hands.

It was the last thought that passed through her mind before the padlocked door to the clinic slammed open. Karoline's natural instinct, despite the calming gas, was to leap up, but when she tried, she felt

wrenching pain in her lower half. He wasn't done with the procedure, and her movement only yielded a glimpse at the tailor's macabre handiwork.

Guards filtered carefully into the room, and the tailor raised his hands. His eyes met hers and accusation pooled behind his widened irises. At first she didn't comprehend the look, but then understanding crept in. How could he think she had something to do with this? When she needed his help so badly?

"Deniel, you've got quite the mess here." The voice was smooth and colored with amusement.

"Give me a few minutes and I'll clean up," the tailor offered.

"No need."

The guards surrounded him then, cuffing his arms in fast, fluid movements.

"It would be easier to rip you, but frankly, we can use your skills," the official told Deniel.

"Like I'd work with you, Patton," Deniel said.

"I wasn't asking you."

Karoline tried to comprehend what was happening. She was caught. She'd be imprisoned, maybe even altered for deviance. Or worse. She felt hands on her then. They weren't the practiced fingers of the tailor. She struggled against the searing sensation pinning her at the waist to see medics patching her up. She wanted to cry out for them to stop. To let him finish. But the mask was over her mouth.

A face blurred to life above her, and she had to blink against the guards' bright handlights.

"Karoline Swander?"

She nodded.

"Is this your wife?" the official asked.

Karoline didn't turn to look for Max, but she heard his voice answer affirmatively.

"But I didn't know she was up to this, Ambassador Patton," he said.

“I’m sure you would never sanction something like this, Minister Swander,” the ambassador reassured him. “You do understand that I can’t overlook this deviance though?”

“Of course,” Max responded. He wasn’t going to question the orders of a superior, particularly those of Cormac Patton.

Karoline’s scream broke through the mask, startling several medics, but it only made Cormac laugh.

“Bit of a troublemaker.”

“I suppose,” Max said.

“You won’t have to worry about her anymore,” Cormac said. The two men watched as the medics moved her to a cot and carried her out of the hidden clinic. She never stopped screaming.

“But I’m a senior official, I’ll need a wife.”

“Oh that can be arranged,” Cormac assured him. “I’ll need you to go into the clinic. Fill out some paperwork. Get a few tests.”

“Can we—” Max hesitated “—keep this quiet?”

“I promise you won’t have to worry at all,” Cormac said.

Max released a long breath and smiled. Cormac nudged him gently toward the door, and he followed the medics into the transport.

Cormac stood for a long time alone in the cold cement room, surveying the makeshift surgery table and the spots of blood that still pooled there. Finally he cocked his head to activate his complant. “Hannox, the issue is resolved. The wife can be removed, but just rework the husband. Make sure he’s lost in his grief. No need to waste another healthy woman on him.”

Hannox’s voice vibrated his ear. “And the metro? Protocol One?”

“Unnecessary,” Cormac answered without hesitation. “This wasn’t the taint. The citizens of Romen need a lesson. Mrs. Swander’s accident will work nicely.”

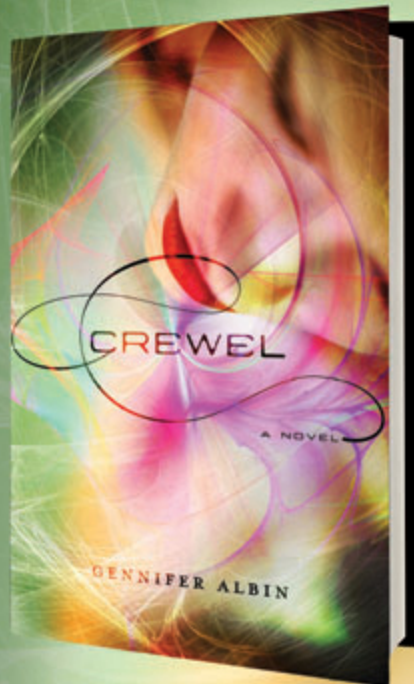
“And if the other traitors aren’t identified?” Hannox asked.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Cormac said, climbing the steps out of the grim clinic. “You can’t hide in Arras for long.”



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IN A WORLD WHERE EVEN
DESTINY IS STRICTLY
CONTROLLED, ONE GIRL
DARES TO BREAK FREE.



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Prologue

THEY CAME IN THE NIGHT. Once, families fought them, neighbors coming to their aid. But now that peace has been established, and the looms proven, girls pray to be retrieved. They still come at night, but now it's to avoid the masses with eager hands. It's a blessing to touch a Spinster as she passes. That's what they tell us.

No one knows why some girls have the gift. There are theories, of course. That it's passed down genetically. Or that girls with an open mind can see the weave of life around them at all times. Even that it's a gift only given to the pure-hearted. But I know better. It's a curse.

I've trained at night with my parents ever since they realized I had the calling. They taught me clumsiness, making me fumble until it looked natural when I dropped a bowl or spilled the water jug. Then we practiced with time, my parents encouraging me to take the silky strands deftly into my fingers to twist and tangle them until they were warped and useless in my hands. This was harder than dropping and spilling. My fingers wanted to weave the delicate tendrils seamlessly with matter. By my sixteenth birthday, when it was time for the required testing, the ruse was so effective, the other girls whispered I would be sent away early.

Incapable.

Awkward.

Artless.

Maybe it was their taunts lodging in my back like tiny daggers that poisoned my resolve. Or perhaps it was the way the practice loom sang out, begging to be touched. But today, the last day of testing, I finally slipped—my fingers gracefully winding through the ebbing bands of time.

Tonight they'll come for me.

One

I CAN COUNT THE DAYS UNTIL SUMMER draws to a close and autumn seeps into the leaves, painting them ginger and scarlet. Right now, though, the dappled light of mid-afternoon is glorious emerald, and it's hot on my face. With sun soaking into me, everything is possible. When it is inevitably gone—the seasons programmed to begin and end with smooth precision—life will take its predetermined route. Like a machine. Like me.

It's quiet outside my sister's academy. I'm the only one waiting for the girls to be released. When I first began my testing cycle, Amie held her pinkie finger up and made me swear to meet her each day after I got out. It was a hard promise to make, knowing they could call me anytime and sweep me away to the Coventry's towers. But I make it, even today. A girl has to have something constant, has to know what to expect. The last bit of chocolate in the monthly rations; the tidy ending to a program on the Stream. I want my little sister to be able to count on a sweet life, even if the heat of summer tastes bitter now.

A bell tolls and girls pour out in a surge of plaid, their giggles and shouts breaking the perfect stillness of the scene. Amie, who's always had more friends than me, bounces out, surrounded by a handful of other girls in the awkward stages of early adolescence. I wave to her and she dashes toward me, catching my hand and pulling me in the direction of our house. Something about her eager greeting every afternoon makes it okay that I don't have many companions my age.

"Did you do it?" she asks in a breathless voice, skipping ahead of me.

I hesitate for a moment. If anyone will be happy about my mistake, it will be Amie. If I tell her the truth, she'll squeal and clap. She'll hug me, and maybe for a moment I can leach her happiness, fill myself up with it, and believe everything is going to turn out fine.

"No," I lie, and her face falls.

"It's okay," she says with a resolved nod. "At least this way you get to stay in Romen. With me."

I'd rather pretend she's right, to allow myself to get lost in the twelve-year-old's gossip, than face what's coming. I have my whole life to be a

Spinster, and only one more night to be her sister. I ooh and aah at the right times, and she believes I'm listening. I imagine that the attention builds her up and completes her, so that when I'm gone she'll have enough not to waste her life searching for it.

Amie's primary academy lets out at the same time as the metro's day shift, so Mom is waiting when we get home. She's in the kitchen and her head snaps up as we enter, her eyes rushing to meet mine. Taking a deep breath, I shake my head, and her shoulders slump in relief. I let her hug me as long as she wants, her embrace flooding me with love. That's why I don't tell them the truth. I want love—not excitement or worry—to be the lingering imprint they leave on me.

Mom reaches up and brushes a strand of hair from my face, but she doesn't smile. Although she thinks I failed at testing, she also knows my time here is almost up. She's thinking that I'll be assigned a role soon, and married shortly thereafter, even if I won't be taken away. What's the point of telling her she'll lose me tonight? It's not important now, and this moment is what matters.

It's an ordinary evening at our ordinary table, and apart from the overcooked pot roast—Mom's specialty and a rare treat—not much is different, not for my family at least. The grandfather clock ticks in our hall, cicadas perform their summer crescendo, a motopact rumbles down the street, and outside the sky fades into dusky twilight beckoning nightfall. It's a day just like the hundreds that came before it, but tonight I won't tiptoe from my bed to my parents' room. The end of testing also means the end of years of training.

I live with my family in a tiny bungalow outside Romen's metro where my parents have been assigned two children and an appropriately sized house. My mom told me they applied for another child when I was eight—before they discovered my condition—but upon evaluation they were denied. The cost to maintain each individual makes it necessary for the Guild to regulate population. She explained this matter-of-factly one morning as she pinned her hair up into elaborate curls before work. I had asked her for a brother. She waited until I was older to explain that it would have been impossible anyway, due to segregation, but I was still mortified. Pushing my rations around my plate, I realize how much easier it would be

if I had been a boy, or if my sister was a boy. I bet my parents wanted boys, too. Then they wouldn't have to worry about us being taken away.

"Adelice," my mother says quietly, "you aren't eating. Testing is over. I would think you'd have an appetite."

She's very good at projecting a calm demeanor, but I sometimes wonder if the carefully painted cosmetics layered until her face is silken with rouged cheeks and plump lips are a ruse to help her stay balanced. She makes it look effortless—the cosmetics, her perfectly pinned scarlet hair, and her secretary suit. She appears to be exactly what is expected of a woman: beautiful, groomed, obedient. I never knew there was another side to her until I was eleven, the year she and my father began training my fingers toward uselessness.

"I'm fine." My response is flat and unbelievable, and I wish I had a perfectly painted face to hide under. Girls are expected to remain pure and natural—in body and appearance—until they're officially released from testing. Purity standards ensure that girls with weaving abilities don't lose them by being promiscuous. Some of my classmates look as beautiful in this state as my mother—delicate and fair. I'm *too* pale. My skin is washed out against my strawberry hair. If only it was the brilliant fiery red of my mother's or soft gold like my sister, Amie's, but mine is as dull as dirty pennies.

"Your mother made a special dinner," my dad points out. His voice is kind, but the implication is clear: I'm wasting food. Staring at the potatoes and too-dry slices of roast beef, I feel guilty. This meal probably ate up two night's rations, and then there's the cake.

It's a large frosted cake from a bakery. My mom has made us small cakes for our birthdays, but nothing like this fancy white cake with sugar flowers and lacy lines of frosting. I know it cost half a week's rations. Most likely they'll resort to eating it for breakfast later in the week while they wait for their next disbursement. The frail white scallops edging the cake make my stomach turn. I'm not used to sweets, and I'm not hungry. As it is, I can barely bring myself to eat a few bites of the overcooked meat.

"This is exactly the cake I want for my birthday," Amie gushes. She's never had anything like a bakery cake before. When Amie came home from academy today and saw this one, my mom told her she could have one for her next birthday. It's a pretty big deal for a kid who's only had hand-me-

downs her whole life, but my mom obviously wants to soften her transition into training.

“It will have to be a bit smaller,” Mom reminds her, “and you won’t be having any of this one if you don’t eat your dinner first.”

I can’t help smiling as Amie’s eyes widen and she begins scooping food into her mouth, gulping it down hard. Mom calls her “an eater.” I wish I could eat like her when I’m excited or tense or sad, but nerves kill my appetite, and the fact that this is the last dinner I’ll ever share with my family has my stomach in knots.

“Did you get this for Adeline?” Amie asks between bites, revealing bits of chewed food.

“Close your mouth when you eat,” my dad says, but I see the corner of his own curling up a bit.

“Yes, Adeline deserved something special today.” My mother’s voice is quiet, but as she speaks her face glows and a faint smile plays at her lips. “I thought we should celebrate.”

“Marfa Crossix’s sister came home from testing last week crying and hasn’t left her room yet,” Amie continues after swallowing the meat.

“Marfa said it was like someone died. Everyone is so sad. Her parents are already setting up courtship appointments to cheer her up. She has an appointment with pretty much every boy with an active marriage profile in Romen.”

Amie laughs, but the rest of the table falls silent. I’m studying the scallops in the icing, trying to make out the delicate pattern the baker used. Amie doesn’t notice the quiet resistance of my parents to the Guild-approved curriculum and marriage laws, but they haven’t exactly been honest with her either. I’m old enough to understand why they don’t want me to become a Spinster, even if they’ve always been careful with what they say to me.

My father clears his throat and looks at my mother for support. “Some girls really want to go to the Coventry. Marfa’s sister must be disappointed.”

“I would be, too,” Amie chirps, shoveling a forkful of potatoes into her mouth. “They showed us pictures at academy. Spinsters are so beautiful, and they have everything.”

“I suppose,” Mom murmurs, slicing small bites of meat with her knife in slow, precise strokes.

“I can’t wait for testing.” Amie sighs dreamily, and my mother frowns at her. Amie’s in too much of a daze to notice.

“Those girls are very privileged, but if Adelice was called, we would never see her again.” Mom’s response is careful. My parents have started trying to plant doubt in Amie’s head, although her tendency to rattle on to anyone listening makes it hard to talk to her about important stuff. But I don’t mind listening to Amie relate the dramas of every girl in her class or the programs she saw on the Stream. It’s my break before spending every night practicing and rehearsing what to say—and not to say. Curling up with my sister before she falls asleep is when I get my only sense of normal.

But a cake can’t buy more than a night’s happiness. My parents will have a long road ahead of them preparing Amie to fail at her testing. She’s never shown an ounce of weaving ability, but they’ll prepare her. I wonder if she’ll still be eager to go when it’s her turn in four years.

“Marfa says when she’s a Spinster she’ll always get her picture on the front of the *Bulletin* so her parents won’t worry. That’s what I’d do, too.” Her face is solemn as though she’s really thought this through.

Mom smiles but doesn’t respond. Amie fawns over the glitzy images in our daily bulletin like most pre-testing girls, but she doesn’t truly understand what Spinsters do. I mean, of course she understands that they maintain and embellish the fabric that makes up our world. Every girl learns that early in academy. But someday my parents will explain what Spinsters really do—that no matter how good their intentions, with absolute power comes corruption. And the Guild has absolute power over us and the Spinsters. But they also feed us and protect us. I listen to my parents, but I don’t really understand either. Can a life of providing food and safety for others be that bad? I only know that what’s about to happen to me is going to break their hearts, and once I’m gone, I’ll never have a chance to tell them I’m okay. I guess I’ll have to get my picture on the front of the *Bulletin* like Marfa Crossix.

The meal continues in silence, and everyone’s eyes gravitate toward our fluffy white centerpiece. The small oak dining table sits four perfectly; we can pass bowls and plates to one another, but tonight my mother served us because there’s room for nothing but the cake. I envy the gleeful sparkle in Amie’s eyes as she stares at it, probably imagining how it will taste or

building her grand thirteenth birthday cake in her head. My parents, on the other hand, sit in quiet relief: the closest to celebrating they can muster.

"I'm sorry you failed, Ad," Amie says, looking up at me. Her eyes dart back to the cake, and I see the longing in them.

"Adelice didn't fail," my father tells her.

"But she wasn't chosen."

"We didn't want her to be chosen," my mother says.

"Did you want to be chosen, Ad?" Amie's question is so earnest and innocent.

I barely shake my head.

"But why not?" Amie asks.

"Do you want that life?" Mom asks her quietly.

"Why are you so against the Spinsters? I don't get why we're celebrating." Amie's eyes stay focused on the cake. She's never been so blunt before.

"We're not against the Spinsterhood," Mom responds in a rush.

"Or the Guild," Dad adds.

"Or the Guild," Mom echoes with a nod. "But if you pass testing, you can never return here."

Here—the cramped two-bedroom house in the girls' neighborhood, where I've been safe from the influence of boys my age. My home, with books stashed in hollowed cubbies behind panels in the walls, along with family heirlooms passed down for almost one hundred years from mother to daughter. I've always loved the radio in particular, even if it doesn't work anymore. Mom says that it used to play music and stories and proclaimed the news, like the Stream does now but without the visuals. I asked once why we kept it if it was useless, and she told me that remembering the past is never useless.

"But a Spinster's life is exciting," Amie argues. "They have parties and beautiful dresses. Spinsters have control."

Her last word hangs in the air, and my parents exchange a worried glance. Control? No one granting permission to have children. No predetermined cosmetic routines. No chosen roles. That would be true control.

"If you think they have control—" Mom begins quietly, but my father coughs.

"They have cake," Amie says with a sigh, slumping against the table.

Dad takes one look at her pitiful face, throws his head back, and laughs. A moment later, my usually stoic mother joins in. Even I feel some giggles bubbling up my throat. Amie does her best to look sad, but her frown twitches until it turns into an impish grin.

“Your cosmetic tokens should arrive next week, Adeline,” my mom says, turning back to me. “I’ll show you how to apply everything.”

“Arras knows, I better be able to apply cosmetics. Isn’t that a girl’s most important job?” The jibe is out of my mouth before I consider what I’m saying. I have a habit of cracking a joke when I’m nervous. But judging from the look of warning on my mom’s face, I’m not being very funny.

“And I’ll jump right on those courtship appointments,” Dad says with a wink, breaking up the tension between Mom and me.

This actually makes me laugh, despite the numbing dread creeping through my limbs. My parents aren’t as eager to get me married and out of the house as most girls’ families are, even if I am required to be married by eighteen. But the joke can’t elevate my mood for long. Right now the thought of getting married, an inevitability that was always too surreal to consider, is out of the question. Spinsters don’t marry.

“And I get to help you choose your cosmetic colors at the co-op, right?” Amie reminds me. She’s been studying catalogs and style sets since she could read. Mom doesn’t take us to the metro co-op to shop often, because it’s not segregated, and when she has it’s been for home supplies, not something exciting like cosmetics.

“I hear they’re increasing the number of teachers in the Corps on assignment day,” Dad continues, serious again.

I’ve always wanted to be a teacher. Secretary, nurse, factory worker—none of the other designated female roles left any room for creativity. Even in a carefully controlled academy curriculum there is more room for expression in teaching than there is in typing notes for businessmen.

“Oh, Ad, you’d be a great teacher,” Amie bursts in. “Whatever you do, don’t get stuck in an office. We just finished our shorthand class, and it was so boring. Besides you have to food-gen coffee all day! Right, Mom?”

Amie looks to her for confirmation, and Mom gives her a quick nod. My sister’s too oblivious to see the pain flash across her face, but I’m not.

“I do make a lot of coffee,” Mom says.

My throat is raw from holding back tears, and if I speak...

“I’m sure you’ll get assigned to be a teacher,” Mom says, eager to change the subject, and then she pats my arm. I must look nervous. I try to imagine what I would be feeling now if assignment day was only a week away for me, but I can’t. I was supposed to go to testing for a month, to be dismissed, and then get assigned. It was the first time I’d been on a loom, one of the large automated machines that show us the fabric of Arras. It was the first time any of us Eligibles had even seen a loom. I only had to act as if I couldn’t see the weave, like the other girls, and answer the proctor’s questions with my practiced lies. If I hadn’t slipped, I would have been dismissed, and then assigned based on my strength assessments at academy. For years, I’d dutifully learned shorthand, home ec, and information storage. But now I’d never get the chance to use any of it.

“We need a new teacher.” Amie interrupts my thoughts. “Mrs. Swander left.”

“Is she expecting a baby?” my mother asks in a knowing way. Her eyes dull a bit as she speaks.

“No.” Amie shakes her head. “Principal Diffet said she had an accident.”

“An accident?” Dad repeats with a frown.

“Yep.” Amie nods, suddenly wide-eyed. “I’ve never known anyone who’s had an accident before.” Her voice is a mix of awe and solemnity. None of us know anyone who has had an accident, because accidents don’t happen in Arras.

“Did Principal Diffet say what happened?” Mom asks so softly that I barely hear her in the quiet dining room.

“No, but he told us not to worry because accidents are very rare and the Guild will be especially careful and investigate and stuff. Is she okay?” she asks, her voice conveying implicit trust. Whatever my father replies, she’ll believe it. I long to fall back in time and feel the comfort of knowing my parents have every answer, knowing I am safe.

My father forces a tight-lipped smile and nods at her. Mom’s eyes meet mine.

“Do you think it’s odd?” She leans into Dad, so Amie won’t hear. It doesn’t matter because Amie has returned to worshipping the cake.

“An accident? Of course.”

“No.” Mom shakes her head. “That the principal told them.”

“It must have been bad,” he whispers.

“Something Manipulation Services couldn’t cover up?”

“We haven’t heard anything at the station.”

“None of the girls said anything today.”

I wish I had some intelligence to share, because I’m feeling excluded. Outside the dining room night has engulfed our quiet street. I can see the shadowed outline of the oak tree in our yard but little else. It won’t be long now, and we’re wasting time worrying about Mrs. Swander’s accident.

“We should eat the cake!” The suggestion bursts from me. My mother, momentarily startled, does a quick inventory of our plates and agrees.

Dad cuts into the cake with an old bread knife, smearing frosting across the blade and blending the vibrant red flowers into dull pink globs. Amie props her body against the table, completely absorbed in the ceremony, while Mom collects the pieces from Dad and passes them around. I’m bringing the first bite to my mouth when Mom stops me.

“Adelice, may your path be blessed. We’re proud of you.” There’s a break in her voice, and I know how much this moment means to her. She’s waited my whole life for this night: my release from testing. I can barely meet her eyes, and she motions for us to eat as she wipes a stray tear from her cheek, leaving a smudge of charcoal from her running mascara.

I take a bite and mash it against the roof of my mouth. The frosting is so sweet that it catches in my throat and makes my nose tingle. I have to wash it down with half a glass of water. Next to me Amie is devouring her piece, but my mother doesn’t tell her to slow down. Now that I’m through testing, it’s Amie’s turn. Tomorrow my parents plan to begin preparing her for her own testing.

“Girls—” my mother begins, but I’ll never know what she was going to say.

There’s a hammering at the door and the sound of many, many boots on our porch. I drop my fork and feel the blood rush out of my face and pool in my feet, weighting me to my chair.

“Adelice,” my father breathes, but he doesn’t ask, because he already knows.

“There isn’t time, Benn!” my mother shrieks, her perfectly applied foundation cracking, but just as quickly she regains control and grabs Amie’s arm.

A low hum fills the air and suddenly a voice booms through the room: “Adelice Lewys has been called to serve the Guild of Twelve. Blessings on

the Spinsters and Arras!”

Our neighbors will be outside soon; no one in Romen would willingly miss a retrieval. There’s nowhere to escape. Everyone here knows me. I rise to my feet to open the door for the retrieval squad, but my father pushes me toward the stairs.

“Daddy!” There’s fear in Amie’s voice.

I grope forward and find her hand, squeezing it tight. I stumble down behind her as my father herds us to the basement. I have no idea what his plan is. The only thing down here is a dank, meagerly stocked root cellar. Mom rushes to the basement wall and a moment later she slides a stack of bricks out of place to reveal a narrow tunnel.

Amie and I stand and watch; her wide-eyed horror mirrors the paralyzing fear I feel. The scene before us shifts and blurs. I can’t wrap my head around what they’re doing even as I see it happening. The only constant—the one real thing in this moment—is Amie’s fragile hand clutching my own. I hold on to it for life, hers and mine. It anchors me, and when my mother wrenches her away, I shriek, sure I’ll vanish into nothing.

“Ad,” Amie cries, stretching out to me through Mom’s arms.

It’s her fear that spurs me back to this moment, and I call out to her, “It’s okay, Ames. Go with Mommy.”

My mother’s hands falter for a moment when I say this. I can’t remember when I last called her Mommy. I’ve been too old and too busy for as long as I can remember. Tears that have been building up wash down her face, and she drops her hold on Amie. My sister jumps into my arms, and I inhale the scent of her soap-clean hair, aware of how fast her small heart beats against my belly. Mom circles us and I soak up the strength of her warm arms. But it’s over too quickly, and with a kiss on my forehead, they’re gone.

“Adelice, here!” My father shoves me toward another hole as Amie and Mom disappear into the passage, but before I enter he grabs my wrist and presses cold metal near my vein. A second later heat sears the tender skin. When he releases my arm, I draw the spot up to my mouth, trying to blow off the burning.

“What...” I search his face for a reason for the techprint, and looking back down, I see the pale shape of a flowing hourglass marking the spot. It’s barely visible on my fair skin.

“I should have done it a long time ago, but...” He shakes off the emotion creeping into his voice and sets his jaw. “It will help you remember who you are. You have to leave now, honey.”

I look into the tunnel that stretches into nothing. “Where does it go?” I can’t keep the panic out of my voice. There’s nowhere to hide in Arras, and this is treason.

Above us a stampede of heavy boots breaks across the wooden floor.

“Go,” he pleads.

They’re in the dining room.

“There’s food on the table! They can’t be far.”

“Search the rest of the house and cordon off the street.”

The feet are in the kitchen now.

“Dad...” I throw my arms around him, unsure if he will follow me or go into another tunnel.

“I knew we could never hide how special you are,” he murmurs against my hair. The basement door bangs open.

But before I can say I’m sorry for failing them, or tell him I love him, the boots are on the stairs. I scramble into the hole. He restacks the bricks behind me, shutting out the light. My chest constricts in the darkness. And then he stops. A large crack of light still streams in to the tunnel from the basement. I can’t move.

The bricks crash onto the concrete floor and light floods back into the tunnel. Choking down the scream fighting to loose itself, I struggle forward in the dirt, away from the growing light. I must keep moving forward. I try to forget Dad, and Mom and Amie in the other tunnel, as I crawl through the cold soil.

Keep moving forward.

I repeat it over and over, afraid that if I stop I will be paralyzed again. But somehow I do keep moving forward, farther and farther into darkness, until cold steel clamps down on my leg. I scream as it digs into my skin and begins drawing me back—back to the light and the men in boots, back to the Guild. I tear against the packed dirt of the tunnel, but the claw is stronger and each desperate lunge I make back toward the darkness drives the metal deeper into my calf.

There is no fighting them.

Two

AS THEY PULL ME FROM THE ESCAPE TUNNEL, someone jabs a needle in my wounded leg. I thrash as the liquid burns through my calf, but suddenly I'm calm. When one of the officers helps me stand in the damp basement, I smile at him. I can't remember being happier.

"Patch that up," barks a tall official coming down the basement stairs. He's not like the others, who are dressed in typical soldier regalia. He is older and very handsome. His jaw is too smoothly sculpted to be natural, but the slight gray peppering his styled hair gives away his age. His nose, eyes, and teeth are too perfect, and I bet he's been taking advantage of renewal patches. He has the kind of face they put on the Stream to read the news. I blink dreamily at him as a medic begins cleaning the wound from the claw. A group of women scurry down behind the official and begin wiping my face and combing my hair. It feels so nice I want to fall asleep. The only thing keeping me awake is the cold, gritty concrete under my bare feet. I've lost my shoes in the struggle.

"You gave her too much," the official grumbles. "I said get her Stream-ready, not dose her out of her mind."

"I'm sorry. She was really fighting us," one of the officers tells him. I can hear the grin in his voice.

"Fix it."

A moment later another needle pricks my arm, and I stop smiling. I'm still calm, but the euphoria is fading.

"Adelice Lewys?" the official asks, and I nod. "Do you understand what's going on?"

I try to say yes but nothing comes out, so I bob my head once more.

"There's a Stream crew upstairs and most of your neighborhood. I'd prefer we didn't have to drag you off looking like a loose thread, but if you try that again I'll have him dose you. Do you understand what I'm saying?" He points to the medic who has finished healing my wound.

I manage to squeak, "Yes."

"Good girl. We'll deal with this later," he says, gesturing to the escape tunnel. "Your job is to smile and look thrilled to be selected. Can you do

that?”

I stare at him.

The official sighs and cocks his head to activate the microscopic complant embedded over his left ear. The device automatically connects you to any other complant user or wall-communication panel. I’ve seen men in the metro chatting on them, but my father’s role as a mechanic doesn’t warrant the privilege of having one implanted. A moment later I’m privy to the man’s one-sided conversation.

“Hannox, do you have them? No, hold her.” Turning back to me, he points to the hole my mother and Amie disappeared through. “Let’s pretend my colleague has someone you love very much in his custody, and your performance for the Stream crew decides whether she lives or dies. Can you look thrilled now?”

I muster up the brightest smile I can and flash it at him.

“Not bad, Adeline.” But then he frowns and pushes away the grooming crew. “Are you idiots? This is a retrieval. She can’t wear cosmetics!”

I look away as he continues to berate the aestheticians, and search for signs of my father. He’s nowhere, but as my eyes scan the wall I can’t make out any other cracks that could hide a passage. Of course, until twenty minutes ago I hadn’t known about even the first two passages.

“Are we clear?” the official asks the medic.

“Give her one more minute.”

“I’m fine,” I say with a smile, practicing for the Stream crew. But as soon as I speak, my stomach contracts hard and sends my dinner back up my throat. I double over and retch up pot roast and frothy cream.

“Fantastic,” the official bellows. “Can’t I even get a competent squad?”

“She’ll be fine now,” the medic says, backing up a few steps.

The official glowers at him and then turns and leads me to the stairs. At the last step, he grabs my arm and leans in close. “Make it look real. Her life depends on it.”

I don’t have the guts to ask him if he means my mother or my sister; his answer will only tell me who is dead. I stagger up the stairs and blink hard against the bright lights of the main floor. Every lamp is on and the kitchen and dining room have been ransacked. As we march through the dining room on our way to the front door, I slip on something dark and sticky. One of the officers catches my arm as I stumble, and I snap my head down to the spot on the floor. It’s nearly black and pools out from a large, stiff bag.

I crumble back against the man behind me.

“No time for that now, sweetheart,” he hisses. “You’ve got a show to put on or we’re going to need more of those bags.”

I can’t tear my eyes from the bag, so he leads me away. I try to tell him there’s blood on my feet, but he’s already barking more orders at his squad.

“Halt,” commands a guard at the door.

The official steps forward, runs his eyes over me, sighs, and steps out onto the porch to thunderous applause. I turn away and focus on the long black bag, but a guard moves over to the table, blocking my view. I glance over to see he’s eating the cake.

“Hey,” I call, and everyone looks at me in surprise. “That’s half a week’s rations! Leave it for my family.”

The officer’s eyes dart to his companion, and I see it on their faces—pity—but he sets down the cake.

“Blessings, Romen! I’m Cormac Patton and...” The rude official addresses the crowd from my porch. More applause. He waits a moment for it to calm down.

“He always has time for applause,” an aesthetician notes dryly.

“Blessings, Arras. I’m Cormac Patton,” her companion mimics him in a low voice, and they laugh until a guard shushes them.

Cormac Patton. Coventry Ambassador for the Guild of Twelve and the Stream’s number one pretty boy. How could I have not recognized him? They must have really drugged me. Or maybe I’m not used to celebrities hanging out in my basement. Even my mom has a thing for him. But I don’t see the appeal. Sure, he’s perpetually clad in a black, double-breasted tuxedo, and very handsome, but he has to be at least forty. Or maybe even older, since I can’t remember a time in my life when he looked anything but forty.

I can’t comprehend that he’s standing on my porch right now.

“We are privileged to call to service Adeline Lewys,” Cormac’s voice bellows. An officer pushes me out next to him. “May Arras flourish at her touch.”

The crowd echoes back the blessing and color floods my cheeks. I paste the bright smile on my face and will it to stick.

“Wave,” Cormac instructs me through gritted teeth, his own smile undiminished as he gives the command.

I wave shyly and keep beaming at the crowd. A moment later, officers surround and flank us, escorting us to a waiting motocarriage. The crowd swarms into a mob and all I see are hands. The officers hold most of them back, and I shrink away from the mob. Everywhere I look, fingers claw at me, grabbing for a bit of my skirt or a caress of my hair. I'm breathing faster, and beside me Cormac frowns. The drugs must not be as strong as he thought. I think of his threat and force myself to look excited.

The motocarriage is longer than any of the motopacts I've seen in Romen. I've seen ones like this on the Stream. Motopacts are daily cars to drive into the metro, but motocarriages like this have chauffeurs. I fix my eyes on it; I only have to make it that far and then this public charade will be over. An officer ushers me to the rear side door and helps me in. As the door shuts me safely away from the cheering crowd, I scowl.

"That's much more attractive," Cormac mutters as he slides in next to me. "At least you're the last retrieval."

"Had a long day?" I ask harshly.

"No, but I can't imagine dragging your deadweight around much longer," he snaps back as he pours himself a glass of amber liquid. He doesn't bother to offer me any.

I lapse into silence. Deadweight. The image of the body bag lying casually on my dining room floor floats into my head and hot tears prick my eyes, threatening to spill over.

I stare out the window so he won't see me cry. The glass is tinted and the crowd can no longer watch us, but they're still milling around. Neighbors talk animatedly, pointing to our house. Several heads incline, relaying the news to people far away on their complaints. We haven't had a retrieval in Romen in ten years. Tomorrow I'll be on Romen's morning Stream. I wonder what they'll say about my parents. My sister.

Cormac is downing the last drops of his cocktail when his head cocks to the side to take a call. "Here," he grunts. He's quiet but soon disinterest turns to mild annoyance.

"Clean it," he says. "No, clean all of it."

His head shifts back down, disconnecting from the call, and he looks at me. "Lucky girl."

I shrug, not willing to betray my feelings at the moment. I'm not sure what cleaning is, and from the way he growled the order, I'm not sure I want to know.

“Oh, you have no idea,” he says. “How’s your leg?”

I glance down to the gashes the claw left and find they’re gone.

“Fine, I guess.” I try to keep the surprise out of my voice but can’t.

“Renewal patch,” he informs me. “One of the many perks you’ll have as a Spinster.”

I don’t respond, and he returns to the crystal bottle for another drink. My eyes wander back to the window. We’re nearly out of Romen, and it’s hard to believe I’ll never come back here. The view grows hazy and my eyelids droop; the drugs they administered earlier are making me sleepy. But right before my eyes close, the street disappears behind us, shimmering and fading into nothing.

An officer shakes me awake when we get to Nilus Station and hands me a pair of shoes. Another escorts me to the toilet and stands guard. Afterward, I’m taken to a small private powder room and given a simple white shift to change into. They take away everything I was wearing before. I dress as slowly as possible, trying to sift through the fog in my head.

I can’t put off going out into the station for long. Nilus Station is situated in the capital of the Western Sector and it re-bounds travelers to the other three capital cities in Arras. It’s also strictly policed. Only the most important businessmen can travel between the four sectors; someone like my dad wouldn’t qualify. I’ve never been out of Romen’s city limits before today. I should be excited, but all I feel is a dull twinge at the thought. Cormac is lounging in a turquoise chair outside the powder room.

“Ever been to a rebound station, Adeline?” Cormac asks conversationally as he stands to greet me when I step back into the station lobby.

I shake my head. I’m not eager to act like we’re friends.

“Didn’t think so. It’s pretty rare these days for some citizens to get border passes.” He smiles, and for the first time I notice a crease in his flawless skin. By “some citizens” he means women and service workers.

Cormac sets the pace, and I stroll with him along the periphery of the station. There’s a small booth offering shoe shines, a coat-check stand, and a little café. He gestures for me to follow him into the restaurant, and we’re led up to the second-floor mezzanine by a waiter. From here we can watch the travelers waiting for their rebound appointments in the great marble hall. Even though it’s busy, the sounds of travel—shoes clicking, compliant

conversations, rustling *Bulletins*—fill the space and bounce back across it. The roar of energy is nearly deafening.

“Miss, I’ll need to see your privilege card,” the waiter says, sneering at me.

I glance down at my simple dress and realize I don’t even have my citizen ID with me, but Cormac speaks before I can make excuses.

“She’s my guest. Do you need to see my PC?” It’s more a challenge than a question.

The waiter glances at him and the haughty smile evaporates. “Ambassador Patton, I apologize. I didn’t recognize you. I only saw the girl.”

Something about the way he says *the girl* makes me feel dirty.

“No need to apologize. You don’t get many girls in here, I imagine.” He laughs, and the waiter joins him.

“We weren’t informed there would be a retrieval squad traveling through, or we would have been prepared,” the young man assures him.

“It was a last-minute retrieval, so the usual call-aheads weren’t possible.”

“So she’s a...” He eyes me admiringly.

“She is an Eligible. Treat her as you would a Spinster.” There’s an edge of warning to Cormac’s voice, and the young man nods solemnly.

He waits on me hand and foot, although I’m not allowed to order for myself. And as if a hovering waiter isn’t annoying enough, every man in the place stares at me. It’s the shameless gaze of the patrons that provokes a startling realization. Glancing back at the bustling travelers, I see the outline of suits and fedoras. The only other woman in the station takes coats at the stand I noticed earlier. Apparently only men are allowed to eat here. I knew rebounding was reserved for important businessmen, but I never realized that even the station was segregated. I rub my hands on the hem of my shift, aware of how warm it is here.

“Lecherous lot,” Cormac says, and chuckles. “Actually, you don’t see many women out from behind the desk these days. Not without their husbands.”

It takes a minute for me to realize he means me. I’m the woman out and about.

“I’d suggest eating. I know you can’t have much left in you after that stupid medic screwed up. You would think they would know how much

juice to give a 115-pound girl, and yet it's always too much or too little. You're lucky though—the Nilus Station has a great café.” He tips his head back toward the kitchen door. “It might be a while before you eat again.”

“I’m not very hungry,” I say. My lamb chop sits untouched on the plate in front of me. Cormac’s meal is similarly neglected, for all his advice to eat, but only because he’s nursing a bourbon.

Cormac leans against the table and looks at me. “I figured as much. Take my advice, though, and eat something.”

I think of the dining room table and white cake sitting on it, the puddle of black blood under its legs, and shake my head. The only thing I’m hungry for is answers.

“Eat, and I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

I take a couple of bites, knowing I won’t be able to eat if he answers me first anyway, but as soon as I swallow, I turn my attention back to him. “Are they dead?” The words come out flat, and in that moment I know I’ve lost hope.

“Your father is,” Cormac admits in a low voice. There’s no remorse in his face. It’s a fact.

I look down and take a deep breath. “And my mother and sister?”

“Your sister is in custody, but I have no news on your mother.”

“Then she got away?” I ask breathlessly, wondering how they managed to catch Amie. Despite the news about my father, I feel a tug of hope.

“She got away for now. You’ll be more upset later when the Valpron wears off.”

“Maybe I’m stronger than you think,” I challenge, although I’m all too aware of the numbness throughout my body.

“That would be a surprise. Valpron is a calming agent.” Cormac’s eyes narrow, and he sets down his fork. “What was your plan anyway?”

“Plan?”

“Don’t be stupid, Adelice,” he snarls. “They found four tunnels under your house that lead to places around your neighborhood. Where were you going to go?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t know about them.” It’s the truth. I’m not sure I could lie right now if I wanted to, but I’d never guessed exactly how far my parents were willing to go to keep me from the Guild. How long ago had they dug those four tunnels, and how had they gotten away with it? From

the way Cormac is staring at me, I'm sure he believes I know more than I'm telling.

Cormac snorts, but resumes eating. Or rather, drinking. "Sure you didn't. Just like you didn't try to fail at the testing."

My eyes snap up to his, and I wonder how much he knows about this, but I don't say anything else.

"I've seen the surveillance Stream on your testing. The moment you wove was an accident," he continues.

"I had no idea what I was doing," I say, and in truth, I didn't. I'd never used a loom to weave before and something about seeing the fabric of life—the very raw materials that composed the space around me—laid out before me, rattled me. We'd been measured and questioned, and had practiced basic tasks like weaving actual fabric, but none of my classmates had much success with it. It took a certain talent they didn't seem to possess, and I'd spent my whole childhood learning to ignore mine.

"I doubt that," Cormac says, setting down his glass. "I know it was an accident because the loom wasn't on. A girl who can weave through time without a loom is a rare thing. It takes a very special girl to do that. We almost retrieved you right there."

I want to sink under the table. I knew I'd given myself away, but not how much I'd revealed. This is my fault.

"Fine. Don't say anything. There's no way your mother got out," he tells me coldly. "We had to clean the area after the Stream crew left."

"Clean?" I think back to the complant conversation I overheard in the motocarriage. It was short and he was mad, but the rest is lost in a haze. As I sift back further, the evening comes in bursts of images. Eating with my family. A white cake. Cold, dark dirt.

"I love how innocent you are. It's really just...delightful." He smirks, and this time I see tiny crinkles around his eyes. "The section has been cleaned and rewoven. No use trying to explain why a whole family went missing, especially not with the recent accident."

"My sister's teacher," I murmur.

"Mrs. Swander," he confirms. "What a mess, but not significant enough to justify a full cleaning."

I try to wrap my mind around what he's saying. The Guild transports food, assigns roles and houses, and oversees the addition of new babies to the population. But Arras hasn't had an accident or crime in years. At least

not that I know of. “Wait, are you saying you removed the memories of all the people in Romen?”

“Not exactly,” he says, downing the last of his bourbon. “We adjusted them a bit. When people try to remember your family, it will be a bit blurry. Your history now indicates you were an only child and your parents have been given clearance to move closer to the Coventry—that’s if anyone bothers to check up on you, but they won’t.”

“You made it all disappear,” I whisper.

“It’s easy to adjust at night thanks to the curfew,” he says, taking a bite of steak. “I’m sure it sounds horrible to you, but there’s no need to cause massive panic.”

“You mean”—I lean in and keep my voice low—“there’s no need to let people know you murdered their neighbors.”

The wicked grin fades from his face. “Someday you’ll understand, Adeline, that everything I do ensures people are safe. Cleaning a whole town isn’t something I take lightly, and it’s not easy. Most Spinsters don’t have the talent for it. You’d be wise to remember you’re the reason I had to order it.”

“I thought Arras didn’t have to worry about safety. Isn’t that why you need girls like me?” I challenge, gripping the butter knife next to my plate.

“Like I said, your ignorance is truly delightful.” But he doesn’t seem amused anymore. Instead his black eyes blaze with repressed fury.

“Spinsters do ensure safety, by following my orders. It’s not all parties and loom work. The Guild demands loyalty. Never forget that.”

I can hear the warning in his voice not to push this further, so I relax my hand and the knife clatters back to the table.

“I hope you had enough to eat,” he snaps, rising from his seat. Apparently two bites of food is enough to appease him.

I follow. I don’t have any other choice.

A girl from our neighborhood was labeled a deviant a few years back. It’s a very rare thing, since everyone in Arras lives by zero-tolerance policy for misbehavior. But my dad told me that occasionally a child is brought up on charges and taken away. He said sometimes they come back, but most don’t. The little girl came back, but she was always in a daze, never quite in the moment with the rest of us. That’s how my neighbors will be when they think of me. It’s as though I don’t exist, and even the meds still coursing

through my body can't block the tingle of pain that runs down to my fingertips when I think of it.

The meal was a courtesy it turns out, because we don't have rebound appointments. We don't need them. I'm torn between feeling guilty that he was being nice to me and wondering what his motives were. I trail Cormac as he strides past the line of men waiting on deck for their scheduled departures. A few grumble as we pass but the others shush them.

"I need to bump two spots," Cormac tells the man at the counter, flashing him his PC.

I have no doubt this man knows who he is, but he takes the card and studies it for a moment before keying in a code on the companel, a communications system built into the wall behind him. A moment later, a young woman dressed in a snug sky-blue suit steps out from the corridor behind the desk and leads us past the counter.

"Ambassador Patton, will you require a refreshment while you rebound?" She's all bubbles and pink lipstick.

"I ate. Thank you," he tells her with a wink.

She doesn't ask me.

Cormac's rebound compartment is before my own, and I half expect him to disappear through the door without another word to me, but he turns and sizes me up one last time. "Adelice, I suggest you get some rest during your rebound."

I keep my eyes focused on the end of the corridor. He's acting like my dad. Telling me when to eat, when to sleep. But he's the reason I need a surrogate father in the first place.

"You know you don't deserve the way they're going to treat you." His voice sounds concerned but the Valpron must be wearing off, because I can barely keep myself from spitting at him. I don't need his kindness.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourself into," he says, reading my face. He sighs and opens the chamber door. "I hope you learn to listen before it's too late."

I don't bother to respond. I don't want his arrogant advice. I watch him fixedly until the door shuts behind him. My guide shepherds me to the next compartment and follows me in.

"This is the first time you've rebounded," she says matter-of-factly as she ushers me to a single chair on a small platform in the center of the room. "You're likely to experience some nausea or vomiting."

I sit down awkwardly and take in the sparse room.

“Here.” She reaches around me and buckles a strap against my waist.

“What’s that for?”

“We need to keep your movement confined to a minimal space during the rebounding process. Usually you can read or eat or drink,” she tells me, unfolding a small tray from the arm of the chair. “But no getting up.”

I glance down at the straps and raise an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry.” She lifts her heavily lined eyes, and I can see she means it. “I’m not authorized to give you anything.”

“It’s okay,” I say with a shrug. “I get the impression girls are rare around here.”

The girl adjusts my straps and checks the buckle before she steps back. She hesitates and checks the countdown on the wall: I have two minutes until the rebound will begin.

“That’s it though.” She pauses and glances around the room. “I probably should shut up.”

“What?” The medication is definitely wearing off, because now I’m holding back panic.

“Yes, women very rarely rebound, only Spinsters and Ministers’ wives. But they are given anything they want,” she whispers.

“I don’t understand,” I admit slowly.

She leans forward and pretends to adjust the tray. “They come in dressed up and we are supposed to give them bulletins and fashion catalogs to peruse. But you...”

I stare at her, trying to get what she’s telling me.

“My directions were to keep you buckled and locked down.”

“Locked down?”

“Yes.” She sighs and gives me a sympathetic pat. “I’m sorry.”

She reaches behind my back, and a second later, a large helmet woven of thick steel chains clamps down over my head. I cry out, but the sound is muffled. She squeezes my hand once, and I calm a little. Then more metal locks down, binding my wrists.

“Your rebound will only take an hour,” she reassures me, although I can barely hear her through the twisted metal. “Good luck, Adelice.”

I wish I’d asked her name.

The helmet blocks most of the room around me, but I can see through the gaps. It’s an inconsequential room with bare white walls, except for the

clock counting down in the corner.

The nausea hits first. The floor drops from under me and my stomach turns over, but I don't fall. The helmet keeps my head perfectly straight and my neck stretched, so I don't throw up, but I want to. Closing my eyes, I breathe evenly, trying to keep the sickness at bay. When I open them and peer through the steel wires, the room around me is gone, and I'm surrounded by a shimmering array of lights. The sight calms me and I focus on studying the gleaming strands that comprise the rebound compartment. Glowing beams twist across the room and then long threads of gray knit up through them, crisscrossing over the light into a luminous fabric of gold and silver. Somewhere a girl sits, replacing the weave of the rebound chamber with that of a chamber in a coventry, effectively moving me from one location to the other. I'm traveling hundreds of miles without moving a muscle. It's a delicate procedure, which is why it's reserved for the most important people in Arras. The Stream ran a special story vlip about the process a few years ago.

Gradually the light disappears and slowly—too slowly—gray walls form in patches around me, and the radiant canvas of the rebound process fades into a concrete room. It takes an eternity before the beams are gone, but when the last flickers into wall, I'm happy to feel the helmet being lifted from my head.

A group of solemnly clad officers surrounds me. The one who removed the helmet hesitates at the cuffs on my arms. They ache from being shackled during the trip, and I'm about to tell him so when a young blond in an expensive suit steps forward and holds his hand up. His head is cocked to the side, and I realize he's on his complant. Despite his obvious youth, he seems to be in charge. He's the kind of boy my classmates would zero in on in the daily *Bulletin* and giggle over as they passed his image around. But even this close to him, I only feel curiosity.

"Sedate her."

"Sir?" the officer asks in surprise.

"She wants her sedated," the blond boy orders. "You want to ask her why?"

The officer shakes his head, but as a medic rushes forward with a syringe I can see the apology in the boy's blindingly blue eyes.



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